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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 000587

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E.O. 12958: DECL: TEN YEARS
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [ASEC](#) [EC](#)
SUBJECT: POLITICAL CRISIS ESCALATES; CONGRESS SUSPENDED

REF: A. QUITO 554

[1](#)B. QUITO 556

Classified By: PolOff Jarahn Hillsman for reasons 1.4 (b&d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Ecuador's ongoing institutional impasse between electoral authorities and Congress continued on March 13 as the Constitutional Court announced its refusal to decide the dispute -- eliminating for now at least the best opportunity for resolution. In a show of high political theater, some twenty to forty of the PRIAN and PSP deputies who had been dismissed by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) forced their way into the Congress building early on March 13. Party discipline held as the replacement deputies stayed away. President of Congress Jorge Cevallos later postponed the session for a lack of a quorum until March 20. The dramatic action in Congress received blanket media coverage, aggravating perceptions of institutional chaos. President Correa reportedly faulted the dismissed deputies for inciting violence, and called for citizens to peacefully demonstrate their support for a national constituent assembly. With the Correa government supporting the TSE decision, the opposition seeks to change public opinion (currently heavily in Correa's favor) by playing the victim. Without Correa government participation, offers by the OAS and the Catholic Church to mediate are less likely to bear fruit. End Summary.

Ousted Congress Storms Congress

[1](#)2. (SBU) An estimated 20-40 of the 56 members of Congress removed by TSE on March 8 forced their way into the Congressional building past police barricades around 8:00am on March 12. With TV cameras providing live coverage on local channels, PRIAN Congresswoman Gloria Gallardo yelled "we are living in a dictatorship" as she and fellow PRIAN deputy Sylka Sanchez pushed through police barriers. Others echoed Gallardo's sentiment, charging that Correa was using the police to keep them out of Congress. PSP Vice President of Congress Edison Chavez and PRIAN congressman Hugo Romero reportedly received injuries in the melee; Romero was taken away in an ambulance but his injuries are reportedly not serious. President of Congress Jorge Cevallos shortly thereafter canceled the session for a lack of quorum (51 is the required number), convoking the next session for March [1](#)20. Of the 44 deputies retaining political rights, 12 are from the PRIAN-PSP-PSC-UDC opposition cluster. If those parties can maintain discipline and prevent their alternates from stepping in, Congress will be unable to muster a quorum and remain effectively suspended.

13. (C) PSC congressman Pascual del Cioppo called PolChief late on March 12 saying the opposition feared the Constitutional Court was under pressure from the government to deny the Cevallos request for a Court ruling on the festering dispute between Congress and the TSE.

Constitutional Court Rejects Intervention

14. (C) As del Cioppo feared, on March 13, the Constitutional Court rejected the March 9 request by President of Congress Jorge Cevallos for a Court ruling to decide the legality of both Congress' firing of the TSE president and the TSE's subsequent move against 56 members of Congress for impeding the April 15 referendum process (note: the number changed from 57 to 56 because del Cioppo proved that he had been out of the country at the time of the supposedly illegal vote and was removed from the banned list.) In rejecting the petition, the Court President Santiago Velasquez cited procedural errors in the request (the petition came from Cevallos rather than by congressional resolution, since there was no quorum and vote endorsing the request was held on March 9) and said Congress could either appeal directly to the Constitutional Court plenary or resubmit a complete petition. Opposition leadership has not yet indicated whether it will make a fresh attempt to gain TC action.

Correa Blames Congress

15. (SBU) Correa reportedly condemned the stripped congress deputies for forcing their way into the building and blamed them for the resulting violent confrontation and injuries. He called on pro-assembly supporters to take to the streets to peacefully counter supporters that are reportedly being brought in to Quito by the PSP, PRIAN, and the PSC. Alianza PAIS has also convoked pro-government demonstrations in Guayaquil for March 15. Correa expressed his hope that Congress would soon return to function with alternate deputies, representing the same parties. "We will not accept a dictatorship of any type," he affirmed.

16. (SBU) In his weekly radio address on March 10, President Rafael Correa criticized the March 9 editorial by 11 top Ecuadorian daily newspapers that faulted rivalries between the Executive, Congress, and the TSE for creating the current political crisis (described Ref B). President Correa called the editorial "immoral" for asserting that the Executive shared blame for the impasse. He vowed that Congress would not be permitted to undermine the referendum convoked for April 15, and that his national constituent assembly proposal was "past the point of return." Referring to the headline of the offensive editorial, Correa said that the only "intolerable" situation was the continued presence of the political, economic, and media "mafias." The president called for peaceful demonstrations on March 12 to "show the media, bought out by elites, and the political mafias removed by the TSE that their abuses will no longer be tolerated." Those demonstrations never materialized in Quito, and few attended in Guayaquil.

GOE Welcomes OAS Support for Referendum, Rejects IACHR Criticism

17. (C) In a March 10 press release the MFA reaffirmed the Executive's respect for the constitution and rule of law, and cited comments by OAS General Secretary Jose Miguel Insulza on March 9 in support of the constituent assembly as a means of achieving needed political reform. The communique expressed the Executive's support for the TSE's legal authority to remove the 56 members of Congress for interfering in the electoral process, and said that the TSE and Congress would need to resolve the conflict within the bounds of the Ecuadorian constitution. The communique also lamented OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

President Florentin Melendez' March 9 press statement that Ecuador had entered a state of generalized "institutional failure," blaming Congress for the crisis.

Catholic Church Offers Mediation

¶8. (SBU) The president of the Catholic Church's Episcopal Conference, Monsignor Nestor Herrera, on March 12 again publicly expressed the Church's concern over the political crisis and offered to mediate discussions. Herrera said that the Church is worried that heightened tensions could further incite violent and destructive protests. He said that President Correa is obligated to guarantee order so that his constituent assembly could move forward. Herrera also expressed the Church's discontent over Correa's March 10 attack against the media, and regretted that Correa had declined to meet with him.

Comment

¶9. (C) The unauthorized entry of the Congress building was high political theater, as opposition leaders decried their victimhood. The move probably did not gain much sympathy for the unpopular deputies, but by successfully inflaming perceptions of conflict and political chaos, it potentially increases pressure on the Correa government to intervene in some way to restore order. Correa continues to refuse to do so, apparently sanguine about his public support and confident that the TSE can implement the April 15 referendum despite the political noise. We have privately encouraged the government, the opposition, and civil society to seek peaceful resolution of the political crisis, and will continue to do so. Correa, by disregarding Congress' changes to the assembly statute and manipulating the TSE, bears responsibility for provoking the current mess in Congress, although Congress took the bait and retaliated with its own dubious measures. Until the public starts to hold him responsible, however, near-term prospects for resolution of the current institutional conflict are low.

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